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A COMPUTERIZED COMPREHENSIBLE WRITING AID(U) MICHIGAN
UNIV ANN ARBOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM
D E KIERAS 28 SEP 87 FR-87/ONR-27 N00814-85-K-0385

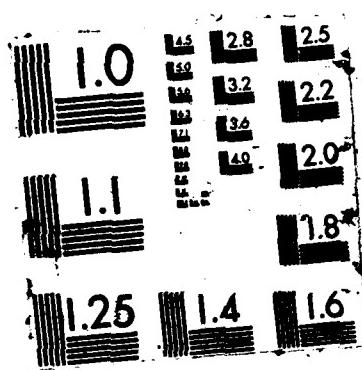
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A Computerized Comprehensible Writing Aid

FINAL REPORT

David E. Kieras

University of Michigan

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Report No. 27 (FR-87/ONR-27)

September 28, 1987

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<p>→ This is the final report for a research contract concerned with further development of a computerized aid for preparing comprehensible technical documents. This contract was a follow-on to the contract N00014-84-K-0729, NR 667-513. The project will be further continued as a supplement to ONR contract N00014-85-K-0138, NR 667-543.</p> <p>→ The goal of this project is to develop a computer program that will serve as an editorial tool for improving the comprehensibility of technical documents such as training materials or technical manuals for equipment. The program would take as input a draft document and would output a sentence-by sentence critique of the comprehensibility of the document, identifying problems and suggesting solutions where it is feasible to do so. This final report provides a summary of the current state of the project. <i>Keywords:</i></p>			
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A Computerized Comprehensible Writing Aid

FINAL REPORT

David E. Kieras, Principal Investigator

University of Michigan

N00014-85-K-0385, NR 667-547

This is the final report for a research contract concerned with further development of a computerized aid for preparing comprehensible technical documents. This contract was a follow-on to the contract N00014-84-K-0729, NR 667-513. The project will be further continued as a supplement to ONR contract N00014-85-K-0138, NR 667-543. The goal of this project is to develop a computer program that will serve as an editorial tool for improving the comprehensibility of technical documents such as training materials or technical manuals for equipment. The program would take as input a draft document and would output a sentence-by-sentence critique of the comprehensibility of the document, identifying problems and suggesting solutions where it is feasible to do so. The work under current funding is intended to produce a prototype system that runs well enough for writers to try out in an actual working environment, even if the system is relatively limited.

The work on this project has been slow and difficult. The final report (Kieras, 1985c) of the previous contract summarizes the previous effort on this project. This final report provides a summary of the current state of the project.

WORK ACCOMPLISHED

Comprehensibility System Development

In this project, three separate comprehensibility systems have been developed and implemented. For purposes of providing background, the summary starts with the first, developed under the previous contract.

Demonstration system. This first system is described in Technical Report No. 17 (Kieras 1985a). This system was originally implemented in UCI LISP and ported to the INTERLISP-D environment running on an 1108. The function of this system was to demonstrate the concept of an advanced aid for comprehensible writing. Although assembled out of existing components, this simple system could generate much more sophisticated criticisms of comprehension problems than existing writing aid software.

This system was based on the simulation model of comprehension described in Kieras (1983). The basic organization

of the demonstration system has been retained in its successors. Figure 1 shows this structure as currently implemented. The augmented transition network (ATN) parser analyzes the surface structure of the input sentences and produces the corresponding semantic structure for the sentence content in the form of an ACT semantic network (Anderson, 1976). This semantic structure is tagged with information about the corresponding syntactic form in the input. For example, the main proposition is tagged if it appeared in the passive voice. An example appears in Figure 2. A reference resolution module then examines the portions of the network that correspond to noun phrases and then compares them to the semantic content of the preceding text to determine what the referent is for each noun phrase. This defines what information is "given" versus "new" in the sentence; after all other processing of the sentence is completed, the new information is added to the semantic structure for the passage.

After reference resolution is complete, a criticism module, consisting mostly of production rules, analyses the pattern of syntactic tags on the semantic structure with regard to the previous text content, and generates criticisms or comments. For example, if the main proposition of a sentence was stated in the passive voice, but the referent of the surface subject noun phrase is not also marked as the current discourse topic, a criticism is produced that the passive voice has been used improperly. Figure 3 gives examples of such rules, using the current PPS rule representation.

Graphic interface system. The second system was begun at the end of the previous contract and occupied much of the time in the present contract. This system was a response to the fact that the main problem that had to be solved in order to develop a usable comprehensible writing aid was the extension of the parser in the demonstration system. The object of the graphic interface system was to take advantage of the INTERLISP-D environment by providing direct manipulation and display facilities (a "parsing workbench") that would allow us to develop ATN grammars much more easily than previous programming environments had permitted.

The natural form for expressing an ATN grammar is as a network, consisting of nodes that represent parsing states interconnected with arcs that denote what kind of lexical item or grammatical construction must be present before the parsing can go to the next state. The graphic interface system actually displays these networks directly in a large window, and, by selecting nodes or arcs with the mouse, the grammar developer could view, edit, or modify these nodes and arcs. In addition, the grammar could be tested easily. When a parse was underway, the display would contain the parsing network that was currently active, and nodes and arcs in the network would be highlighted to show the current parsing state. The parse could be speeded up, slowed down, or halted in midstream to allow inspection of the

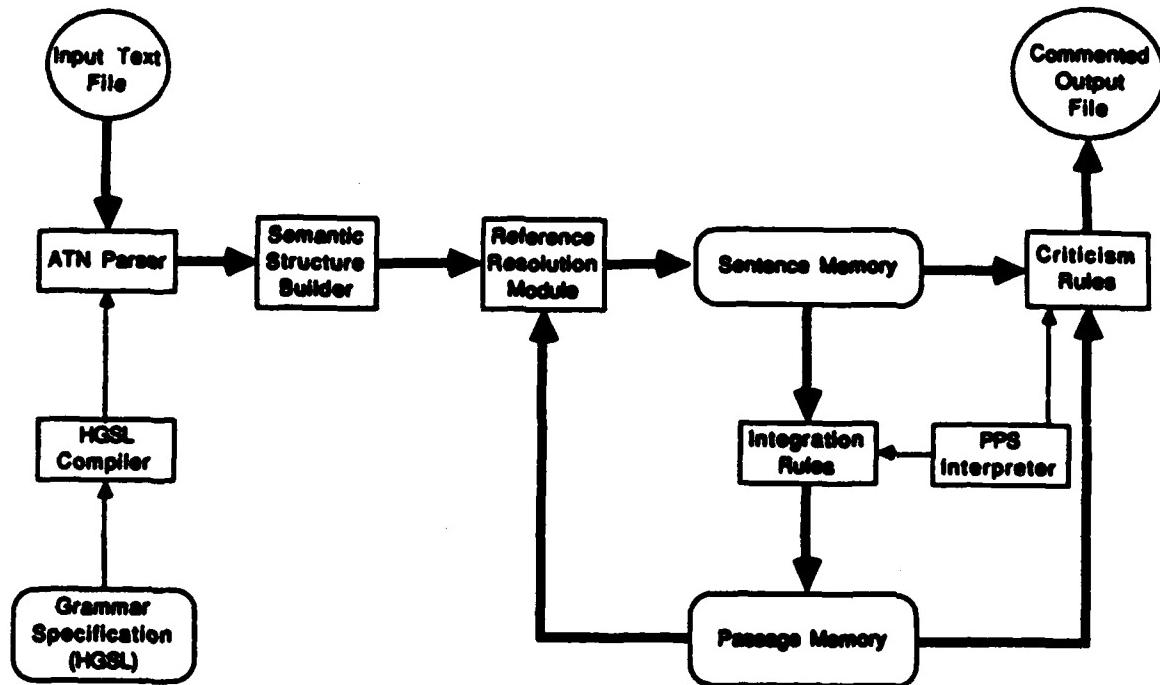
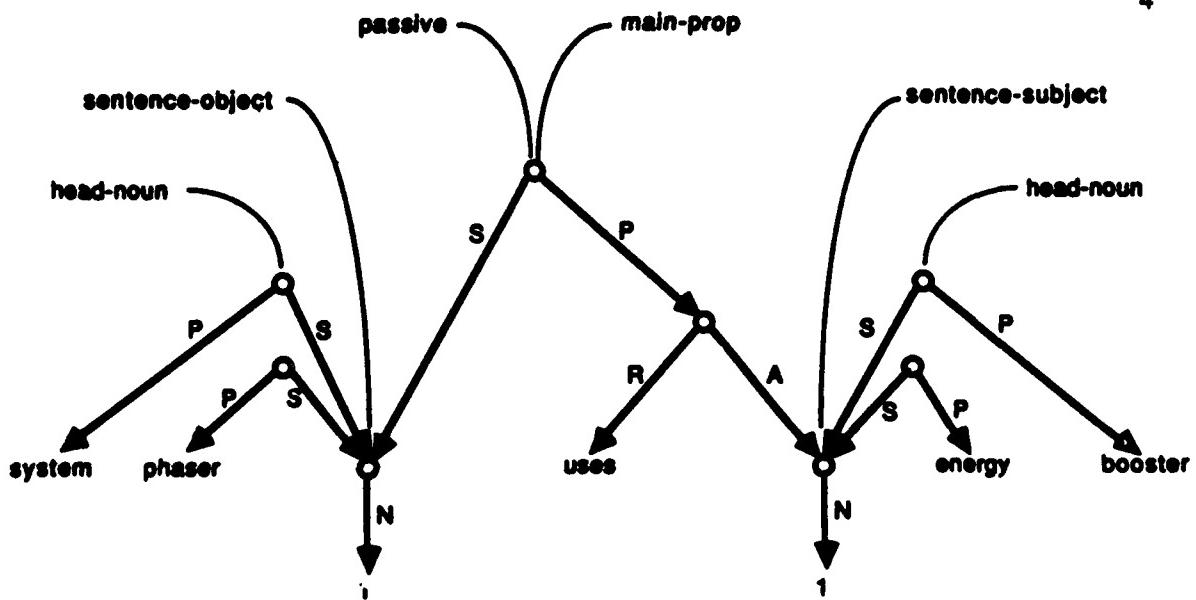


Figure 1. Current structure of the comprehensibility system.

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The energy booster is used by the phaser system.

Figure 2. Example of syntactically-tagged semantic structure for a sentence.

```
(BadPassive
IF
  ((CONTROL GOAL DO CRITICISM)
   (SM TAG ?MAIN-PROP PASSIVE)
   (SM TAG ?MAIN-PROP STATEMENT-MAIN)
   (SM TAG ?STATEMENT-SUBJECT STATEMENT-SUBJECT)
   (NOT (PM TAG ?STATEMENT-SUBJECT DISCOURSE-TOPIC)))
 THEN
  ((PRINT-MSG "BAD PASSIVE")))

(GoodPassive
IF
  ((CONTROL GOAL DO CRITICISM)
   (SM TAG ?MAIN-PROP PASSIVE)
   (SM TAG ?MAIN-PROP STATEMENT-MAIN)
   (SM TAG ?STATEMENT-SUBJECT STATEMENT-SUBJECT)
   (PM TAG ?STATEMENT-SUBJECT DISCOURSE-TOPIC))
 THEN
  ((PRINT-MSG "GOOD PASSIVE")))
```

Figure 3. Example of criticism rules in PPS format.

current state or results of the parse. Figure 4 is an example of the ATN display. Other important facilities were also available, such as a graphic display of the tagged semantic structure produced by the parser, illustrated in Figure 5.

The overall quality of this implementation was very good, but it turned out, for reasons that will be described below, that even this powerful development environment was not adequate to the task of developing a large, complex, ATN in a reasonable amount of time. However, the code is still available and will be supplied on request.

Using the graphic interface system, an effort was made to construct a large ATN adequate to handle samples of actual draft technical writing supplied by DPRDC. An attempt to make use of previously published ATNs or large grammars was not very fruitful, because they had not been developed with this type of prose in mind.

A complete version of a comprehensibility system was assembled in the graphic interface package, and demonstrated to DPRDC personnel on two separate visits to our laboratory. The input sentences would be fed one at time either from the 1108 keyboard or from a file. The output of the system was comments on each sentence, expressed, as in the demonstration system, in terms of psycholinguistic jargon.

As in the demonstration system, the ATN parser automatically generated an ACT representation of the sentence content as the sentence was parsed. A rather large lexicon of military terms, supplied by DPRDC, was incorporated. As an experiment, the reference resolution module consisted of a set of production rules to resolve noun-phrase referents. This resulted in slow processing, but this approach is potentially more powerful than alternatives, and so might be good for the more subtle and complex forms of reference that might need to be handled. A few criticism rules were implemented using the PPS system (Covrigaru & Kieras, 1987) developed under other projects; the example rules in Figure 3 are from this system.

The graphic interface system was far too slow, even with the display generation turned off. A major speed obstacle with the system was the parsing, followed by the relatively low speed of the production system interpreter. This slow execution could be largely blamed on the Xerox 1108, which is not at all a fast computer, together with the fact that full advantage was not taken of some of the possible ways to speed up ATN interpreter, and also on the fact that the noun-phrase resolution was handled in a rather slow fashion as well.

Grammar development system. The difficulties alluded to above of developing a large ATN grammar turned out to be quite

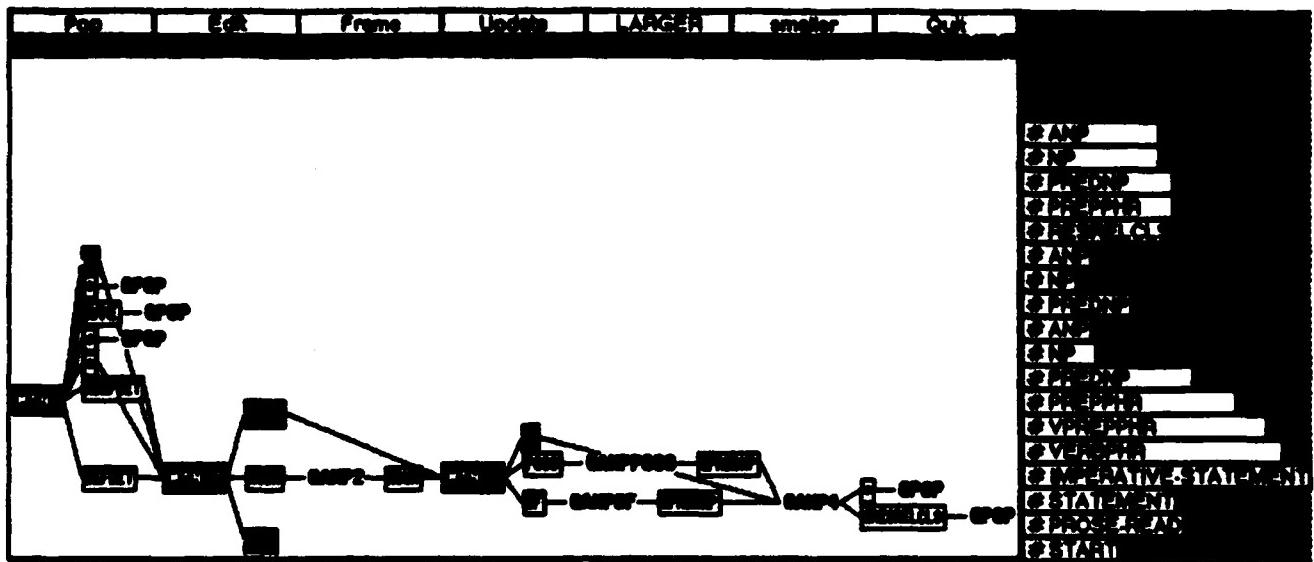


Figure 4. ATN display in the graphic interface "parsing workbench" system. The stack at the right shows the current network embeddings, while the major noun-phrase ATN appears as the network in the main window.

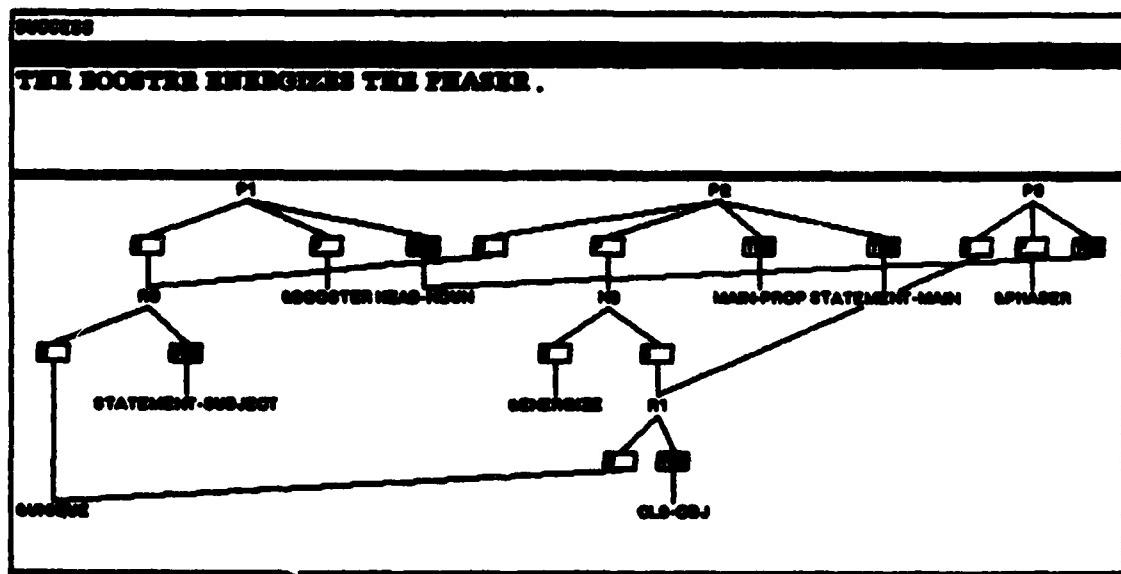


Figure 5. An example semantic structure display in the graphical interface system.

serious, even with the powerful graphic interface system. The reasons for this will be more clear from a summary of the grammar development process: Based on the DPRDC samples, we would choose a particular syntactic pattern to be included in the developing grammar. Modifying the grammar to allow for the parsing of this pattern would then consist of adding various new arcs and nodes to the ATN. This had to be done in such a way that it would not disturb existing parsing pathways. In addition, code would have to be written to produce the semantic structure denoted by the syntactic pattern, and incorporated into the ATN. These details could be handled with enough care and testing, but as the grammar grew in complexity, the time required became increasingly long.

In response, John Mayer, a graduate student who performed the detailed grammar development, developed a specification language for ATN grammars which then made it possible to relatively quickly develop a large grammar using the DPRDC samples. This work is described in Technical Report No. 25 (Mayer and Kieras, 1987). This specification language has similarities to BNF, standard linguistic rewrite rules, and regular expression notation. Instead of specifying which nodes should be connected with which arcs, the grammar developer can express a new pattern very compactly in a linear notation, and the specification language compiler would then generate the corresponding new ATN. (See Figure 1.)

In the time available, Mayer developed a compiler for the specification language, an interpreter for the ATN produced by the compiler, and a large grammar for technical prose. This ATN interpreter produces a syntax tree, rather than a semantic representation, so its use in the comprehensibility system will require developing a syntax-tree to ACT representation translator. The coverage of the large grammar seems good. In the middle of development, using a series of samples from DPRDC, this parser could handle at least 78% of the sentences in the samples, and at the end of development, as many as 96% of the sentences in a new sample. The judgement was made in Technical Report No. 25 that this parser had adequate coverage to be of practical utility in the comprehensibility system.

The full documentation of this work is contained in Technical Report No. 25, which contains a formal definition of the specification language, the algorithms for the compiler and parser, a description and specification of the large grammar that was developed, and results on the syntactic coverage of the grammar using the DPRDC samples.

Linguistic Analysis Work

A small amount of support from this contract in the form of graduate student support was used for some linguistic analysis that supported the overall goals of this project. This work was

done by Leslie Olsen, with the assistance of Rod Johnson, a linguistics graduate student. The work was an analysis of passages collected by Bruce Britton from Army sources (Britton & Glynn, submitted). These passages appeared in both an original and revised form as examples in an Army document on how to revise technical materials. Britton had conducted some recall studies showing that the revised versions of the passages did result in better recall of the information after a delay. Britton supplied us with both versions of these passages. The question was what the improvement in recall was due to. One explanation suggested by Britton was that the improvement was due to the revisions using various signalling techniques such as improved headings and typefaces. The analysis conducted by Olsen and Johnson compared the versions of a few of the passages in terms of referential forms and cohesion.

The results were that the revisions were as good or better than the originals both in terms of referential use and cohesion; thus the improvements could be due to these factors, rather than the others suggested by Britton. One major difference was that the revised versions replaced telegraphic forms of noun phrases with full ones as well as fixing certain other referential problems (the telegraphic style is common in the NPRDC samples).

Another difference was that many procedures were presented in a descriptive way in the originals, but in an imperative form in the revised version; thus a lack of focus in the descriptive form was replaced with a fairly sharp focus around the chain of imperatives in the revised version. Furthermore, the value of the procedural content being expressed in the imperative corresponds to remarks by Kieras (1985b; in press) about the benefits of being able to construct production rules easily from text.

This work, which will be written up in the future, suggests that some of the criticisms of the system will be valuable.

Summary of Work Accomplished

In the period covered by this report, a substantial attempt was made to develop a prototype of a practical comprehensible writing aid. Developing an adequate parser was more difficult than anticipated, not due to a lack of technical or scientific concepts, but rather to the sheer bookkeeping problems of trying to develop a large set of parsing rules. As a result it was not possible to develop the full prototype system. Rather, a complete system was developed that had too limited a grammar to be usable, followed by development of a tool that enabled development of a full sized and usable parser, but additional work is required to produce a complete comprehensibility system. Finally, a small amount of linguistic analytic work, together with the earlier experimental work done on this project, shows

that the kinds of problems that the system could detect are important qualities of more comprehensible technical documents.

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Dr. Michael Gassereith
Stanford University
Computer Science Department
Stanford, CA 94305

Dr. Herbert Ginsburg
Teachers College
Columbia University
525 West 121st Street
New York, NY 10027

Lee Gladwin
Route 3 -- Box 225
Blacksburg, VA 24260

Dr. Robert Glaser
Learning Research
& Development Center
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hare Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Dr. Arthur M. Glenberg
University of Wisconsin
W. J. Bregman Psychology Bldg.
1202 W. Johnson Street
Madison, WI 53706

DR. Marvin D. Glock
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853

Dr. Sam Gluckstein
Department of Psychology
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08540

Dr. Daniel Gopher
Industrial Engineering
& Management
Technion
Haifa 32000
ISRAEL

Dr. Sherrie Gott
AFRL/MODJ
Brooks AFB, TX 76235

Dr. James G. Greeno
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720

Dr. Dix Gregory
Behavioral Sciences Division
Admiralty Research
Establishment
Feddington
Middlesex, ENGLAND

Prof. Edward Haertel
School of Education
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

Dr. Henry M. Haffiz
Haffiz Resources, Inc.
4910 33rd Road, North
Arlington, VA 22207

Dr. Donald K. Hambleton
Prof. of Education & Psychology
University of Massachusetts
at Amherst

Hills House
Amherst, MA 01003

Dr. John N. Hammer
Center for Man-Machine
Systems Research
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA 30332

Dr. Wayne Harvey
Center for Learning Technology
Educational Development Center
55 Chapel Street
Newton, MA 02160

Dr. Barbara Hayes-Roth
Department of Computer Science
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 95305

Dr. Frederick Hayes-Roth
Teknoleidge
525 University Ave.
Palo Alto, CA 94301

Dr. Joan I. Heller
505 Haddon Road
Oakland, CA 94606

Dr. Janet Jackson
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Biologisch Centrum, Viegel D
Kerklaan 30, 9751 KN Haren
(GN.)
NETHERLANDS

Dr. James D. Hollan
HCC, Human Interface Program
3500 West Balcones Center Dr.
Austin, TX 78759

Dr. John Holland
University of Michigan
3116 EECs
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2122

Dr. Keith Holyoak
University of California,
Los Angeles
Department of Psychology
Los Angeles, CA 90024

Dr. Thomas Holzman
Lockheed Georgia
Dept. 64-31
Zone 278
Marietta, GA 30063

Ms. Julia S. Hough
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
6012 Greene Street
Philadelphia, PA 19144

Dr. James Howard
Dept. of Psychology
Human Performance Laboratory
Catholic University of
America
Washington, DC 20064

Dr. Barbara Hutson
Virginia Tech
Graduate Center
2990 Relestar Ct.
Fall Church, VA 22042

Dr. Daniel B. Jones
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory
Commission
Division of Human Factors
Safety
Washington, DC 20555

Dr. Douglas H. Jones
Thatcher Jones Associates
P.O. Box 6640
10 Trafalgar Court
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648

Dr. Shelly Heller
Department of Electrical
Engineering & Computer Science
George Washington University
Washington, DC 20052

Dr. Per Helmersen
University of Oslo
Department of Psychology
Box 1094
Oslo 3, NORWAY

Dr. Alice Isen
Department of Psychology
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

Dr. Janet Jackson
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Biologisch Centrum, Viegel D
Kerklaan 30, 9751 KN Haren
(GN.)
NETHERLANDS

Dr. R. J. K. Jacob
Computer Science and Systems
Code: 7590
Information Technology Division
Naval Research Laboratory
Washington, DC 20375

Neil Jacobstein
Manager, Research and
Advanced Development
Teknowledge, Inc.
525 University Ave.
Palo Alto, CA 94301-1982

COL Dennis W. Jarvi
Commander
AFHRL
Brooks AFB, TX 78235-5601

Dr. Robin Jeffries
Hewlett-Packard Laboratories
P.O. Box 10490
Palo Alto, CA 94303-0971

CDR Tom Jones
ONR Code 125
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

Mr. Daniel B. Jones
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory
Commission
Division of Human Factors
Safety
Washington, DC 20555

Dr. Barbara Hutson
Virginia Tech
Graduate Center
2990 Relestar Ct.
Fall Church, VA 22042

Dr. James G. Greeno
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720

Dr. Ruth Kandler
University of Minnesota
Department of Psychology
Bilklet Mall
75 S. River Road
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Dr. Milton S. Katz
Army Research Institute
3801 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Frank Keil
Department of Psychology
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14850

Dr. Mandy Kellogg
IBM T. J. Watson Research Ctr.
P.O. Box 218
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598

Dr. Dennis Kibler
University of California
Department of Information
and Computer Science
Irvine, CA 92717

Dr. Peter Kincaid
Training Analysis
& Evaluation Group
Department of the Navy
Orlando, FL 32813

Dr. Walter Kintech
Department of Psychology
University of Colorado
Campus Box 345
Boulder, CO 80392

Dr. Paula Kirk
Cambridge Associates
University Programs Division
Cambridge, MA 0117
37031-0117

Dr. David Klahr
Carnegie-Mellon University
Department of Psychology
Schenley Park
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Dr. Janet L. Kolodner
Georgia Institute of
Technology
School of Information and
Computer Science
Atlanta, GA 30332-0280

Dr. David H. Krantz
2 Washington Square Village
Apt. # 15J
New York, NY 10012

Dr. Benjamin Kuipers
University of Texas at Austin
Department of Computer Sciences
T.S. Painter Hall 3.28
Austin, TX 78712

Dr. John Laird
EECS
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2122

Dr. David R. Lambert
Naval Ocean Systems Center
Code 4417
271 Catalina Boulevard
San Diego, CA 92152-6600

Dr. Pat Langley
University of California
Department of Information
and Computer Science
Irvine, CA 92717

Dr. Marcy Lansant
University of North Carolina
The L. L. Thurstone Lab.
Davis Hall 013A
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

**Science and Technology
Division,
Library of Congress
Washington, DC 20540**

Dr. Alan M. Lesgold
Learning Research and
Development Center
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Dr. Alan Leshner
Deputy Division Director
Behavioral and Neural Sciences
National Science Foundation
1800 G Street
Washington, DC 20550

Dr. Jim Levin
Department of
Educational Psychology
210 Education Building
1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820-6990

Dr. John Levine
Learning R&D Center
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Dr. Michael Levine
Educational Psychology
210 Education Bldg.
University of Illinois
Champaign, IL 61801

Dr. Clayton Lewis
University of Colorado
Campus Box 430
Boulder, CO 80309

Matt Lewis
Department of Psychology
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Library,
Naval War College
 Newport, RI 02840

Library,
Naval Training Systems
Center
Orlando, FL 32813

Dr. Don Lyon
P. O. Box 44
Higley, AZ 85216

Vern Malec
NPORD, Code P-306
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Dr. Jane Malin
Mail Code SR 111
NASA Johnson Space Center
Houston, TX 77058

Dr. William L. Maloy
Chief of Naval Education
and Training
Naval Air Station
Pensacola, FL 32508

Dr. Elaine Marsh
Naval Research Laboratory
Code 7510
4555 Overlook Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20375-5000

Dr. Sandra P. Marshall
Dept. of Psychology
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA 92182

Dr. Richard E. Mayer
Department of Psychology
University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106

Dr. Gail McLean
CAS/Psychology
Northwestern University
1859 Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60201

Dr. Joe McLachlan
Navy Personnel Ref. Center
San Diego, CA 92112-5417

Dr. James S. McMichael
Navy Personnel Research
and Development Center
Code 05
San Diego, CA 92132

Dr. Barbara Means
Human Resources
Research Organization
116 South Washington
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dr. Douglas L. Medin
Department of Psychology
University of Illinois
605 E. Daniel Street
Champaign, IL 61820

Dr. Jose Mestre
Department of Physics
Kahrebeck Laboratory
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003

Dr. Al Mayroots
Office of Naval Research
Code 1133
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

Dr. Ryszard S. Michalski
University of Illinois
Department of Computer Science
1304 North Springfield Avenue
Urbana, IL 61801

Prof. D. Michie
The Turing Institute
35 North Raasawer Street
Glasgow G1 2AD, Scotland
UNITED KINGDOM

Dr. George A. Miller
Department of Psychology
Green Hall
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08540

Dr. Lance Miller
LMI-FDO Headquarters
6699 Rockledge Drive
Bethesda, MD 20817

Dr. Andrew R. Molnar
Scientific and Engineering
Personnel and Education
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

Dr. William Montague
NPRDC Code 13
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Mr. Marvin D. Moncimiro
NASA Headquarters
RTS-6
Washington, DC 20546

Dr. Nancy Morris
Search Technology, Inc.
5556-A Peachtree Parkway
Technology Park/Summit
Norcross, GA 30092

Dr. Randy Munro
Program Manager
Training Research Division
RmB600
1100 S. Washington
Alessandria, VA 22314

Dr. Allen Mano
Behavioral Technology
Laboratories - USC
Redondo Beach, CA 90277

Dr. David Navon
Institute for Cognitive Science
University of California
La Jolla, CA 92093

Mr. William S. Meale
HQ ATC/RTA
Randolph AFB, TX 78150

Dr. T. Miblett
The Turing Institute
36 North Raasawer Street
Glasgow G1 2AD, Scotland
UNITED KINGDOM

Dr. Harold F. O'Meill, Jr.
School of Education - WPN 801
Department of Educational
Psychology & Technology
University of Southern
California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0031

Dr. Michael Oberlin
Naval Training Systems Center
Code 711
Orlando, FL 32813-7100

Dr. James B. Olsen
Director,
Waterford Testing Center
1681 West 820 North
Provo, UT 84601

Dr. A. F. Morcic
Computer Science and Systems
Code: 7590
Information Technology Division
Naval Research Laboratory
Washington, DC 20375

Dr. William P. O'Neil
Deputy Technical Director,
NPRDC Code 01A
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Dr. Robert J. O'Neil
Director, Training Laboratory,
NPRDC (Code 05)
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Dr. John O'Neil
Director, manpower and
personnel
laboratory,
NPRDC (Code 06)
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Dr. Richard O'Neil
Director, Human Factors
& Organizational Systems
Lab.,
NPRDC (Code 07)
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Dr. Richard O'Neil
Library, NPRDC
Code P2011
San Diego, CA 92152-6800

Dr. Harold F. O'Meill, Jr.
School of Education - WPN 801
Department of Educational
Psychology & Technology
University of Southern
California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0031

Dr. Judith Orasanu
Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. James B. Olsen
Director,
Waterford Testing Center
1681 West 820 North
Provo, UT 84601

Dr. James B. Olsen
Office of Naval Research,
Code 1133
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

Dr. James B. Olsen
Office of Naval Research,
Code 1142B1
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

Dr. James B. Olsen
Office of Naval Research,
Code 1142
800 N. Quincy St.
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

Dr. James B. Olsen
Office of Naval Research,
Code 1142CS
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000
(16 Copies)

Dr. James B. Olsen
Psychologist,
Office of Naval Research
Branch Office, London
Box 39
PPG New York, NY 09510

Dr. James B. Olsen
Special Assistant for Marine
Corps Matters,
ONR Code 00MC

Dr. James B. Olsen
800 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

Dr. James B. Olsen
Psychologist,
Office of Naval Research
Liaison Office, Far East
APO San Francisco, CA 96501

- CDR R. T. Parlette
Chief of Naval Operations
Washington, DC 20370-2000
- Dr. Steven E. Poltrock
NCC, Human Interface Program
Austin, TX 78759
- Dr. James Paulson
Department of Psychology
Portland State University
P.O. Box 751
Portland, OR 97207
- Dr. Douglas Pearce
DCIEM
Box 2600
Downsview, Ontario
Canada
- Dr. Virginia E. Pendergrass
Code 711
Naval Training Systems Center
Orlando, FL 32813-7106
- Military Assistant for Training
and Personnel Technology,
OUSD (R & E)
Room 3D129, The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-3900
- LCDR Frank C. Petbo, NSC, USN
CHASTA Code M36, Bldg. 1
NAS Corpus Christi, TX 78419
- Dr. Steven Pinker
Department of Psychology
S16-016
M.I.T.
Cambridge, MA 02139
- Dr. Tjerk Ploof
Twente University of Technology
Department of Education
P.O. Box 217
7500 AE HANSGROEVE
THE NETHERLANDS
- CDR R. T. Parlette
NCC, Human Interface Program
Austin, TX 78759
- Dr. Mary C. Potter
MIT (B-10-032)
Cambridge, MA 02139
- Dr. Joseph Psotka
ARTH: PSU-IC
Army Research Institute
3601 Research Ave.
Alexandria, VA 22313
- Dr. Steve Reder
Northwest Regional Lab.
300 SW Sixth Ave.
Portland, OR 97204
- Dr. James A. Reggia
University of Maryland
School of Medicine
Department of Neurology
22 South Greene Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
- Dr. Wesley Regian
AFRL/MOD
Brooks AFB, TX 78235
- Dr. Gil Ricard
Mail Stop C04-14
Grumman Aerospace Corp.
Bethpage, NY 11714
- Mark Richard
1041 Lake Street
San Francisco, CA 94110
- William Russo
Code 712
Naval Training Systems Center
Orlando, FL 32813
- Dr. Linda G. Roberts
Science, Education, and
Transportation Program
Office of Technology Assessment
Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510
- Dr. Ernst Z. Rothkopf
AT&T Bell Laboratories
Room 2D-456
600 Mountain Avenue
Murray Hill, NJ 07974
- Dr. William B. Rouse
Search Technology, Inc.
5550-A Peachtree Parkway
Technology Park/Summit
Norcross, GA 30092
- Dr. Roger Schank
Yale University
Computer Science Department
P.O. Box 2158
New Haven, CT 06520
- Dr. Janet Schofield
Learning R&D Center
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
- Karen A. Schriver
Department of English
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- Dr. Hans-Milli Schroiff
Institut fuer Psychologie
der RMTN Aachen
Jaegerstrasse zwischen 17 u. 19
5100 Aachen
WEST GERMANY
- Dr. Judith Segal
OERI
555 New Jersey Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20208
- Dr. Robert J. Seidel
US Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Ave.
Alessandria, VA 22333
- Dr. Colleen M. Seifert
Intelligent Systems Group
Institute for
Cognitive Science (C-015)
UCSD
La Jolla, CA 92093
- Dr. Ranney W. Selden
Assessment Center
CCSSO
Suite 379
400 N. Capitol, NW
Washington, DC 20001
- Dr. Daniel Seewi1
Search Technology, Inc.
5550-A Peachtree Parkway
Technology Park/Summit
Norcross, GA 30092
- Dr. Michael G. Shafto
Aerospace Human Factors Lab
NASA-Ames Research Center
Mail Stop 239-1
Moffett Field, CA 94035
- Dr. Sylvia A. S. Shafto
Department of
Computer Science
Towson State University
Towson, MD 21204
- Dr. Ben Schneiderman
Dept. of Computer Science
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
- Dr. Ted Shortliffe
Computer Science Department
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
- Dr. Valerie Shute
AFHRL/MOS
Brooks AFB, TX 78235
- Mr. Raymond C. Sidorsky
Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- Dr. Robert S. Siegler
Carnegie-Mellon University
Department of Psychology
Schenley Park
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

- Lieut. Robert Stipeon
Defense Advanced Research Projects Administration
1400 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209
- Dr. Zita M. Steantos
Infrared Technology
Systems Area
ARL
Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- Dr. Derek Stilesman
Dept. of Computing Science
Ryerson's College
Old Montreal
H3C 2W5
UNITED KINGDOM
- Dr. Linda B. Smith
Department of Psychology
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
- Dr. Alfred P. Smida
Senior Scientist
Code 07A
Naval Training Systems Center
Orlando, FL 32813
- Dr. Richard B. Snow
Department of Psychology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
- Dr. Elliot Soloway
Yale University
Computer Science Department
P.O. Box 2130
New Haven, CT 06520
- Dr. Richard Sonnen
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92132-6000
- Dr. Paul Speckman
University of Missouri
Department of Statistics
Columbia, MO 65201
- Dr. Kathryn T. Spear
Brown University
Department of Psychology
Providence, RI 02912
- Dr. Marian Stearns
SAI International
333 Ravenswood Ave.
Room B-3424
Menlo Park, CA 94025
- Dr. Frederick Steinheiser
CIA-CIO
Washington, DC 20505
- Dr. Albert Stevens
Bolt Beranek & Newman, Inc.
10 Moulton St.
Cambridge, MA 02238
- Dr. David Stone
XAJ Software, Inc.
3420 East Shea Blvd.
Suite 161
Phoenix, AZ 85028
- Dr. John Tangney
Aroas/MIL
Boeing AFB, DC 20332
- Dr. Eikuni Takeoka
CBUL
252 Engineering Research
Laboratory
Urbana, IL 61801
- Dr. Martin M. Taylor
DCIEN
Box 2000
Downsville, Ontario
CANADA
- Dr. Perry W. Thorndyke
FMC Corporation
Central Engineering Labs
1105 Colman Avenue, Box 500
Santa Clara, CA 95052
- Major Jack Thorpe
NASA
1400 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209
- Dr. Sharon Tkacs
Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- Dr. Martin A. Tolcott
Decision Science
Consortium, Inc.
7700 Leesburg Pike
Falls Church, VA 22043
- Dr. Douglas Toome
Behavioral Technology Labs
1845 S. Elsinore Ave.
Redondo Beach, CA 90277
- Headquarters
U. S. Marine Corps
Code MP-20
Washington, DC 20380
- Dr. Kurt Van Lahn
Department of Psychology
Carnegie-Mellon University
Schenley Park
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- Dr. Jerry Vogt
Navy Personnel R&D Center
Code 51
San Diego, CA 92152-6000
- Dr. Ming-Tai Wang
Lindquist Center
for Measurement
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242
- Roger Weissinger-Baylon
Department of Administrative
Sciences
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93940
- Dr. Keith T. Wescourt
FMC Corporation
Central Engineering Labs
1105 Colman Ave., Box 500
Santa Clara, CA 95052
- Dr. Douglas Wetzel
Code 12
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152-6000
- LCDR Cory deGroot Whithead
Chief of Naval Operations
OP-112G1
Washington, DC 20370-2000
- Dr. Heather Mill
Naval Air Development Center
Code 6021
Marinchester, PA 18974-5000
- Mr. David C. Wilkins
Stanford University
Knowledge Systems Laboratory
701 Welch Road, Bldg. C
Palo Alto, CA 94304
- Dr. Michael Williams
IntelliCorp
1975 El Camino Real West
Mountain View, CA 94036-2216
- A. E. Winterbauer
Research Associate
Electronic Division
Denver Research Institute
University Park
Denver, CO 80208-0454
- Dr. Robert A. Wisher
U.S. Army Institute for the
Behavioral and Social
Sciences
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Arlington, VA 22233
- Dr. Martin F. Wiskoff
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152-6000
- Dr. Frank Witzkov
U. S. Office of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202
- Mr. John H. Wolke
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152-6000
- Dr. Dan Wolsz
AFRL/MOC
Brooks AFB, TX 78235

Dr. George Wong
Biocytelics Laboratory
Memorial Sloan-Kettering
Cancer Center
1275 York Avenue
New York, NY 10021

Mr. Wallace Malfach, III
Harry Pernell, PhD Center
San Diego, CA 92132-6000

Dr. Joe Yaeckstutte
Army Lab
Lucky 207, CO 80239

Mr. Carl York
Green Development Foundation
111 Linton Avenue
Suite 210
Palo Alto, CA 94301

Dr. Joseph L. Young
Memory & Cognitive
Processes
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

Dr. Steven Sonner
Office of Naval Research
Code 114
800 N. Quincy St.
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

END

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